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Arizona transportation officials say they will meet with officials from the Gila River Indian Community, the federal Bureau of Indian Affairs and with U.S. Reps. Harry Mitchell and Ed Pastor to discuss routing Loop 202 through tribal land instead of Ahwatukee and South Mountain Park.

But changing the route of the controversial South Mountain Freeway, planned to connect Chandler to Laveen with an 8-lane, 22-mile roadway, is far from a done deal.

"Our problem, and we have said it in every public meeting, is that we are not sure it would not take a lot more money to build the freeway further south," said Dennis Smith, executive director of the Maricopa Association of Governments, which determines Valley freeway funding.

MAG estimates that putting the 202 on tribal land instead of Ahwatukee would add \$500 million to the planned freeway's current \$1.9 billion price tag.

It also would likely require approval by Gila River Indian Community voters, Smith and a tribal representative said.

The Arizona Department of Transportation, meanwhile, has moved forward with its study of the environmental impact of the planned South Mountain Freeway on Ahwatukee and South Mountain, a requirement of the federal government before construction begins.

ADOT community relations director Timothy Tait said one of his agency's top priorities in coming months is finishing the study of the planned 202's impact on air quality, noise and drainage in Ahwatukee and South Mountain.

"We are not waiting around," he said. "We will attend every meeting and listen to every proposal. But we are not going to sit and wait. We are going forward with the study."

Tait said ADOT officials expect to have little trouble getting the environmental impact study approved, now that MAG's most recent plan for the Loop 202 extension calls for an eight-lane freeway instead of one with 10.

MAG's Regional Council approved the most recent freeway plan at a contentious meeting last month.

Ahwatukee residents argued that the planned freeway would disrupt neighborhoods and schools and members of the Gila River Indian Community said it would plow under sacred land in the South Mountain Preserve.

Following the meeting, Smith said, he received a phone call from Gila River Indian Community Manager David White requesting a meeting with MAG, ADOT, the two congressmen and the BIA to discuss putting the freeway on tribal land.

Smith said because Mitchell and Pastor intend to travel from Washington D.C. to attend the meeting in person, it will take another four weeks or so to organize the gathering.

White, who has not returned phone calls about the issue, is said to be quietly working behind the scenes with Phoenix City Councilman Sal DiCiccio and others who would like to see the freeway built somewhere other than Ahwatukee.

One reason some members of Gila River are interested in a freeway deal is that they hope to swap some of their community's land for federal property in the Estrella Mountains, both DiCiccio and Tait said.

Smith, however, said his agency does not believe the 202 extension could be built on tribal land without extra cost: The freeway would be longer and more expensive to build. Also the state would need to purchase some land that is privately owned by Gila River members.

And Tait said ADOT officials do not intend to formally look at any potential freeway routes south of Ahwatukee until the Gila River Tribal Council repeals two resolutions it has voted on against having the 202 on tribal land.